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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001444

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TAGS: [KDEM](#) [LE](#) [PGOV](#) [PM](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: MGLE01: A/S HILLEN'S DINNER WITH LEBANESE
POLITICAL LEADERS

BEIRUT 00001444 001.4 OF 003

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman. Reason: Sections 1.4 (b)
) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) On May 3, the Ambassador hosted a dinner at his residence for visiting PM A/S Hillen. The guests represented a diverse range of international and Lebanese political figures, all united by their common interest in Lebanon's security situation and relationship with the United States. During the three hour exchange, MP's Farid el Khazen and Mosbah el Ahdab argued that Lebanon needed to move forward on security and other reform issues despite ongoing regional and internal problems. Khazen specifically cited the LAF's inability or unwillingness to carry out the council of minister's order limiting Palestinian arms outside the camps. Shi'a MP Ali Osseiran said that fundamental regional political issues needed to be resolved first, and while honoring American intentions, questioned whether the U.S. would make a long term commitment to Lebanon. The Ambassador, A/S Hillen and UNSYG Personal Representative Geir Pedersen responded that the United States and the international community will remain committed to Lebanon over the coming years because of shared values and strategic interests based on freedom, prosperity and security. They urged at the same time, however, that the Lebanese, who have done so much in the past year and a half, should not miss their reform opportunities because of internal disagreements.
End Summary.

Lebanese Participants:
Simon Karam, former Lebanese Ambassador to the United States
Mosbah el Ahdab, Member of Parliament
Ali Osseiran, Member of Parliament
Geir Pedersen, Personal Representative of the UN Secretary General to Lebanon
Anwar el Khalil, Member of Parliament
Boutros Assaker, Secretary General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Farid el Khazen, Member of Parliament
Michael Young, Editorial Page Editor, The Daily Star

US Participants:
PM A/S John Hillen
Ambassador Feltman
DCM Christopher Murray

LTC Kaz Kotlow, US Army, Office of Defense Cooperation
LTC Benjamin Crockett, Defense Attache
Major Reginald Robinson, US Air Force, PM Foreign Affairs
Officer
Matthew Lehrfeld, Special Assistant to A/S Hillen
Matt Pilcher, Embassy Notetaker

MOVING THE LAF FORWARD,
AROUND HIZBALLAH

12. (C) During his introductory remarks, A/S Hillen noted that his visit to Lebanon was part of a follow-up to Prime Minister Siniora's April visit to Washington, and that the United States wanted to explore ways to build a strong strategic relationship with Lebanon, especially by assisting Lebanon in capacity building of its security services to improve Lebanese security and stability. Anwar el Khalil agreed that capacity building was important, and that the Lebanese armed services would benefit enormously from U.S. training programs. But, he said, Lebanon's crippling debt hindered the ability to provide the necessary manpower, equipment, and training for the armed forces.

13. (C) Then, in a question that sparked an hour-long debate among the guests, columnist Michael Young asked what kind of military reform would be possible with Hizballah, and if plans to integrate Hizballah into the armed forces were really feasible or desirable. The Ambassador asked Young if he thought this plan was seriously under consideration. Young responded that he didn't think it was now, although it was likely sometime soon. Pedersen pointed out that Hizballah might not be the obstacle to security reform, including U.S. security assistance, that many people automatically assume. He pointed to the April 27 as-Safir newspaper interview with Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah, in which Nasrallah said that Hizballah did not oppose U.S. military assistance to Lebanon. According to Pedersen, Hizballah -- whatever its other agendas -- is focused on the defense of Lebanon, and is pragmatic enough to accept assistance from the U.S. if it improves Lebanon's defense capacity.

14. (C) Aoun bloc MP Farid el Khazen argued that Hizballah is only a distraction. (JQZ>Q;state an agreement on Hizballah's status, but that can never be achieved while the LAF remains weak. He said that the main issue isn't even the LAF's capacity, however, but an "ability to act." He pointed to a recent cabinet decision two months ago that gave the Palestinians six months to dismantle military bases outside of the refugee camps, and said that the LAF has done nothing in the interim to carry out this order.

15. (C) Pedersen responded that the agreement on limiting arms outside the camps should be resolved diplomatically, not by force, especially given that the government still has four more months before its self-imposed deadline. Khazen agreed, but said that the LAF still has a role to play in the meantime. "They need to take steps to show they're serious. They should surround the (Palestinian) military bases, and block the roads going in and out so they can't get more weapons. They're not even doing this." Mosbah el Ahdab and Michael Young said that the LAF couldn't afford a military confrontation with Hizballah and the Palestinians, however. Khazen countered, "I'm not talking about a military attack. Give the political process time to work. But the army needs to back up the government's decree to show they're serious." Ahdab agreed, and suggested to Khazen that Aoun should raise these questions publicly. 'OK. We will," Khazen smiled.

PROMOTING INTEGRATION
AND REFORM

16. (C) The Ambassador asked Anwar el Khalil what role the parliamentary committee for defense could play in promoting security improvements and reform. Khalil, the committee's chair, said that they have the ability to introduce

legislation, and that they are currently conducting a strategic review to see how they can improve coordination among Lebanon's security services. A/S Hillen said that "jointness," the coordination of US military service branches, has greatly improved the efficacy of the U.S. military, but that it was something that Congress forced on the Pentagon in the 1980's in the face of deep-seated opposition from the armed services themselves and a powerful secretary of defense. A/S Hillen said it was important that the legislature take the lead in reform efforts, "Very few institutions are self-reforming," he said.

"FORTUNE FAVORS THE BOLD"
PROMOTING U.S.-LEBANESE PARTNERSHIP

¶17. (C) As the conversation turned to presidencies, both Lebanese and American, MP Ali Osseiran said that he supported President Bush and his vision for the Middle East, but that the U.S. needs to do more if we want to realize the "freedom agenda." "Fortune favors the bold," Osseiran said, and argued that the United States needs to solve major, international disputes in the Middle East, namely the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, before we can expect progress on democratization, security sector or economic reform. He also said that the Lebanese were wary of the United States, and worried that our attention would drift, the administration would change hands, and the United States and international community would abandon Lebanon to the appetites and agendas of its larger, more powerful neighbors. "Fix the fundamentals first," Osseiran said, "you must have a Palestinian state. Then we can go forward."

¶18. (C) A/S Hillen responded that the United States is building a strong partnership with Lebanon for its own sake. The actions of the Lebanese people and government over the past year and a half have showed that Lebanon is the very model for the President's vision of democratization in the Middle East. And while this is an important foundation for a bilateral relationship between the U.S. and Lebanon, it is also central to American security -- something that will not change when a new administration takes office in 2009. A/S Hillen said that ultimately it will be up to the Lebanese to see many of these reforms through, but that they can count on long term support from the United States while they do so.

¶19. (C) The Ambassador agreed, and said that the actions of the Lebanese people had made a lasting, positive impression on the United States. But he said it would be dangerous to allow complex, ongoing issues like the Palestinian - Israeli peace process to forestall necessary reform efforts in Lebanon. "There is nothing about 'Palestine' that should keep you from fixing Electricite du Liban. You shouldn't hold Lebanon hostage to these issues," he said. Geir Pedersen added that for the first time in nearly thirty years, Israel has no designs on Lebanon, and given this opportunity, Lebanon's leaders have a responsibility to promote whatever reform efforts they can. A/S Hillen reminded the guests that President Bush is the first U.S. President to back the concept of a Palestinian state.

"FARID FOR PRESIDENT"

¶10. (C) Osseiran said that these reforms were impossible, that Lebanon has to remember it is part of the Arab world, and that they could not move forward on any kind of reform while faced with a "belligerent Israel." "Lebanon is still a battlefield for foreign powers!" Osseiran cried. Farid el Khazen, obviously exasperated, leaned around the table and pointed his finger at Osseiran "It's not! There are two battlefields in the Middle East. Iraq is one, Israel-Palestine is the other. And we're not involved with either one. We've been neglected before, but now we have the full attention and support of the international community. It's our responsibility to work together and take advantage of it!" The conviction of Khazen's remarks rendered everyone silent for a moment. Then Mosbah el Ahdab raised his hand

and declared, "Everyone, I would like to take this opportunity to nominate Farid el Khazen for President of Lebanon," a suggestion that was received with laughter and applause from around the table.

¶11. (C) Anwar el Khalil said that Khazen's point was serious, though. "We need to focus on what can unite us." Khalil warned that it would be disastrous to lose the present opportunities while locked in internal political disagreements. "We need Beirut 1," he said, "but we'll lose it if we can't make any political progress."

THE SYRIAN ELEPHANT IN THE CORNER

¶12. (C) Michael Young agreed these were all important issues, but wondered why no one had yet mentioned Syria. Indeed, Damascus had received scarcely a word of mention from the Lebanese guests during the entire night. "If the Prime Minister wants to improve the Lebanese army, it's about getting them out of Syrian control. Syria's the main issue and we need to talk about it," Young said. Osseiran said that Syria wasn't such a great obstacle, an explanation that Ambassador Simon Karam wasn't ready to accept. "Look," said Karam, "we could tell Ehud Olmert that we are ready for relations and they'd have an Ambassador here within a week. Syria still won't give us an embassy; why do you think that is?"

¶13. (U) This cable has been cleared by A/S Hillen.
FELTMAN